

## THE AGENTIC POWER OF THE INTERNET

SCOTT M. WARING

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) defines social studies as "the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence....in essence, social studies promotes knowledge of and involvement in civic affairs," and within the mission statement for the NCSS, it is stated that "social studies educators teach students the content knowledge, intellectual skills, and civic values necessary for fulfilling the duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy."<sup>1</sup> These thoughts are echoed in a report released by the Task Force on Character Education in the Social Studies in which they state that "students should both understand the nature of democratic principles and values and demonstrate a commitment to those values and principles in the daily routines of their private and public lives."<sup>2</sup> The Task Force on Standards for Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies notes that "exemplary social studies programs develop social and civic participation skills."<sup>3</sup>

These are lofty yet worthy goals. Unfortunately, research indicates that children do not see themselves as possessing the power to be change agents and truly having any involvement within civic affairs.<sup>4</sup> Generally, children attribute agency, having the power or authority to act, to traditionally celebrated historical figures. Often this leads to increased apathy about their own future due to the sense that social change is the prerogative of only the most "powerful" of individuals. Agency is an essential part to being a productive citizen in a participatory democracy, and if children are expected to act, they must believe they possess the power to affect change. Edward A. Shanken avers, "citizens, in the republican sense, must possess agency and must care about the results of their actions if they are to fulfill their responsibility to construct, maintain, and improve society."<sup>5</sup> Teachers must find ways to instill a sense of agency within their students, in spite of traditional thought. It is essential for social studies educators to realize that preparing their students to take on the role of citizenship will be an ongoing and crucial process.

Through interactive technologies, such as the Internet, generally available in the average classroom, educators have the potential to revitalize the traditional notions of citizenship education.<sup>6</sup> Educators need to

utilize various technologies, including the Internet, to encourage their student population to engage in disciplined inquiry, perspective taking, and meaning making and assist in the process of "civic learning, deliberation, and action".<sup>7</sup> Cheryl Mason et al. feel that providing examples in the classroom of what is possible when utilizing emerging technologies is a vital first step in preparing teachers to fulfill the mission of the social studies.<sup>8</sup> This article looks at the notion of agency and ways in which social studies educators can prepare their student population to become agents for social change through the utilization of the Internet.

### Agency

Defining the concept of agency has increasingly become a source of strain and confusion.<sup>9</sup> Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische note that "variants of action theory, normative theory, and political-institutional analysis have defended, attacked, buried, and resuscitated the concept in often contradictory and overlapping ways".<sup>10</sup> Simply, agency can be thought of as the attainment of a goal through human action or the power people have to exercise control over events that affect their lives.<sup>11</sup> Emirbayer and Mische define agency with more complexity by stating that it is:

the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations.<sup>12</sup>

It is felt by some that in order for agency to be present there is a requirement that the actions made by an individual be effective in changing material or cultural conditions and actors involved should possess the ability to examine the consequences of an action and be reflexive in evaluating them.<sup>13</sup> It also requires that an individual intentionally make things happen by his or her own course of action while rationally and consciously selecting a means to achieve an end.<sup>14</sup> This enables individuals to play a role in their own self-development, adaptation, and self-renewal with the situations and environments in which they live.<sup>15</sup>

All human beings involved in a particular situation possess the ability to be an agent, but it is an individual's belief in his or her own self-efficacy which forms the foundation for human agency.<sup>16</sup> The capacity for agency is inherent in all human beings, as individuals are born with a capacity for agency, equivalent to one's ability to use language.<sup>17</sup> Higher and more developed levels of agentic competence are determined by:

a specific range of cultural schemas and resources available in a person's particular social milieu. The specific forms that agency will take consequently vary

enormously and are culturally and historically determined. But a capacity for agency is as much a given for humans as the capacity for respiration.<sup>18</sup>

It is essential that an individual not only be aware of his or her capacity for agency but that one believes he or she has the ability to produce desired results as well as forestalling detrimental ones by the course of his or her actions. Regardless of other factors that may operate as guides and motivators, an individual should be rooted in the core belief that he or she has the power to produce effects through action.

Although one may possess self-efficacy, specific social situations and locales affect agentic opportunities as it is possible for an individual to be an agent when facing in one direction but lose that power as soon as he or she is facing in another.<sup>19</sup> Even though much of what people do is to exercise a control over their self-development and life circumstances, there is also a degree of fortuity in the courses lives take. Some of the most significant determinants of life paths transpire through the most trivial of circumstances.<sup>20</sup> Fortuity does not mean that an individual has no control over various effects and courses; agents find ways in which they may capitalize on the fortuitous nature of life.

Human agency is a temporally embedded process that is educated by the past while being oriented both toward the future and the present.<sup>21</sup> The way people come to understand their own relationship to the past, future, and present makes a difference in the actions they take. An individual's changing conception of agentic possibilities greatly influences how they act within different periods and places and how they see these worlds as more or less responsive to human effort and purpose. Agents live simultaneously in the past, future, and present as they engage situations and repertoires from the past, envision hypothetical pathways, and adjust actions in accordance to emerging situations.<sup>22</sup> Agency is always agency towards something, by the methods and means by which individuals enter into relationships with their surrounding environment, people, meanings, and events.

#### *Four Core Features to Human Agency*

According to Albert Bandura, there are four core features that are essential elements to human agency: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness.<sup>23</sup> Intentionality refers to the power individuals possess to originate actions for specific purposes and with deliberation. Through forethought, individuals motivate themselves and direct actions in anticipation of events that will occur in the future.<sup>24</sup> One's ability to bring expected outcomes to bear on current situations promotes foresightful behavior.<sup>25</sup> An agent must also possess self-reactiveness, as they must be a planner and a forethinker, but they must also be a self-motivator and regulator. Agency must involve not only an indi-

vidual's ability to make deliberative choices and plans for action, but the ability to shape appropriate courses of action and to motivate and regulate their implementation.<sup>26</sup> This multifaceted self-directedness functions through a self-regulatory process that links thought to action. The fourth distinctly core human feature of agency is self-reflectiveness, which means that individuals are not only agents of action but also are conscious self-examiners of their own functioning. Agents have the metacognitive capacity to reflect upon themselves and the adequacy of their thoughts and actions.

#### *Different Modes of Human Agency: Personal, Proxy, and Collective*

There are three different modes of human agency: personal, proxy, and collective.<sup>27</sup> Personal agency is that which is exercised individually. Proxy agency is when people secure desired outcomes through influencing others to act on their behalf; and collective agency is when people act simultaneously to shape their shared future.

Personal agency is exercised on an individual basis, as they bear their influence directly upon themselves and their environment. In circumstances when individuals do not have direct control over social conditions and institutional practices around them or lack the willingness to shoulder responsibility over situations for which they command influence, they seek change through proxy agency.<sup>28</sup> This socially-mediated mode of agency allows individuals to gain desired outcomes through other's access to resources, expertise, influence, or power. Individuals also utilize proxy agency to control situations over which they have the ability to exert direct influence when they believe others can manage the situation better or they do not want to burden themselves with the aspects necessitated by direct control.<sup>29</sup> This form of control has its downside as part of the consequence of proxy agency is the reliance upon the competence, power, and favor of others. In this case, individuals may end up surrendering control to another individual who may not have their best interests in mind.<sup>30</sup>

Since individuals do not live within a vacuum, many goals that are sought are only achievable through collective, socially-interdependent efforts by pooling knowledge, skills, and resources, as well as through providing mutual support, forming alliances, and working together so that things that may not be accomplished individually may be secured.<sup>31</sup> It is the conviction of collective power to generate specific results, rather than simply the sum of their beliefs, that is essential to collective agency.<sup>32</sup> Collective agency is the effort of people acting synchronously on a shared belief, not individual thoughts and efforts of a disembodied group. In order for individuals to function successfully, there is a requirement of a blend of all three modes of agency regardless of cultures within which they reside.<sup>33</sup>

### *Teaching / Historical Agency*

Agency in history is something that must be addressed in classrooms, as students must come to see that they are agents not only in their learning process but also in the greater scope of their lives.<sup>34</sup> Teachers must address the concept of historical agency as students need to be ready to act when situations arise utilizing what they have learned; unfortunately, history is often told as a story and leaves students unprepared to go beyond this and see agentic opportunities.<sup>35</sup> It is vital that students see and believe that all individuals are participants within the ongoing drama of history as both its subjects and agents. Linda Levstik and Keith Barton state:

We make history by the collective activities of our lives, including our participation in both the enduring and ephemeral dilemmas of our times. Unfortunately, history instruction often loses exactly that sense of agency. To the extent that we make history seem both finished and inevitable, students have difficulty seeing themselves as having agency—the power to make history.<sup>36</sup>

Research has suggested students infer that the agency involved in their own communities' social and political formation might best be described as "heroic individuals engaged in individual power struggles."<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, it has been found that students have been taught those individuals in political power are those who hold the ability to be an agent of history. They are being taught and led to believe in a cultural, class, and gender specific ideal of agency that is grossly insufficient.<sup>38</sup> Educators only scratch the surface of the social influence students hold when only briefly discussing social empowerment or attributing historical agency to only those in power positions. We must address the inadequacies of teaching in this manner especially in light of the challenges that will be faced by students in the future; if teachers continue to teach a hyper-individualized heroic notion of agency, students will become apathetic and despondent.<sup>39</sup>

### *Internet/Agency*

Advancements in electronic technologies have revolutionized the nature, reach, and loci of human influence.<sup>40</sup> Due to the global and decentralized nature of the Internet, small causes can have large effects thus enabling actors to have agency at a distance or from anywhere in the world.<sup>41</sup> The Internet provides various social forces with alternative modes of action and innovative ways in which they may organize and disseminate agentic action.<sup>42</sup> Fenghua Wang states, "The Internet fills the gap precisely where the mass media left off in launching new ideas."<sup>43</sup>

The accessibility of information disseminated through various media

outlets has served to encourage interest in international affairs and provided a way in which an increasing number of citizens can have their voice heard and gain a role in the process of social change.<sup>44</sup> In the past, a student's education was primarily dependent upon the schools to which he or she was assigned, but today the Internet offers immeasurable opportunities for students to guide their own learning and to become actively involved in civic life.<sup>45</sup> They now have immediate access at their fingertips to digital libraries, museums, laboratories, and experts, unobstructed by time or location.

As information becomes more accessible online, it is crucial teachers give ample opportunities for students to develop analytical capabilities and acquire the knowledge and skills to move from apathy to action when addressing social issues.<sup>46</sup> Through computer technologies and materials available online, students gain access to diverse people and perspectives that allow them an opportunity to become actively involved in an increasingly global and interactive world.<sup>47</sup> The following four sections will provide ways in which teachers can promote the three types of agency (personal, proxy, and collective) within their student population through the utilization of various Internet resources as well as a section presenting student-created examples of agency and a site for an instructional guide provided to assist educators in the creation of civic participation projects.

#### *Personal Agency and the Internet*

*International Schools CyberFair* (<http://www.gsh.org/GSH/cf>) is a program used by schools and youth organizations around the world that showcases research conducted by school-aged children. CyberFair recognizes and gives awards to the best projects in eight different categories: local leaders, businesses, community organizations, historical landmarks, environment, music, art, and local specialties. This program encourages youth to use technology to share what they have learned and to become advocates for causes that affect their community. The Environmental Awareness and Issues category asks students to design a Web site that exposes local environmental concerns or that highlights special efforts to promote a sense of awareness and action (i.e. disaster preparedness, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, beach erosion, solid waste management, water, air, and noise pollution). International Schools CyberFair hopes that through this program students will gain a better understanding of the world around them and take "individual action" for positive change.

*Scorecard* (<http://www.scorecard.org>) provides information about pollution problems and toxic chemicals that may be found in the visitor to this site's community and opportunities to learn who is responsible. This site offers further information about companies that are chronic offenders, pollution in different geographic areas, and which racial,



ethnic, and income groups historically have endured environmental burdens. Scorecard allows users to take action as informed citizens, by providing them with background knowledge and an opportunity to contact polluting companies and elected representatives, and by indicating ways to become more involved in their own community.

#### *Proxy Agency and the Internet*

*Congress.org* (<http://www.congress.org>) is a private, nonpartisan company that specializes in facilitating civic participation. Through this site, users are able to identify and contact elected leaders in Congress, the White House, and state legislatures. *Congress.org* assists users by allowing them to post letters online, read what other Americans are saying to elected officials, and create and post action alerts in order to enlist others interested in a particular issue. Through the site, one also can have their letters printed and hand-delivered to Congress. *Congress.org* helps users find and contact their local and national media outlets and sends out weekly emails with their representative's votes.

*e-advocates* (<http://e-advocates.com>) defines itself as "the nation's premier, full-service Internet and grassroots advocacy consulting firm." The goal of *e-advocates* is to assist individuals and organizations in harnessing the power of the Internet to achieve legislative and political objectives. This site notes its campaigns generate action at the grassroots level online and are also carried off-line into legislative victories. *e-advocates* offers its users strategy and issue advocacy and an opportunity to empower, activate, educate, and mobilize constituencies to influence policymakers and the media to accomplish various public-affairs objectives.

*SpeakOut.com* (<http://speakout.com>) was started by an individual, Ron Howard, because he was looking for a way in which he could voice his opinion and was not quite sure how to go about accomplishing this. He felt a disconnect with the government and political leaders, so he created this site as a vehicle for connecting people with their elected officials. *SpeakOut.com* allows its users to learn about various issues and gives an opportunity for them to react. *SpeakOut.com* is an online opinion research company that allows its users to freely voice their opinion. This site takes the traditional market research focus groups and political polls and puts them online and allows its users to tell politicians, political parties, corporations, marketers and special-interest groups how they feel and why. The site also provides interactive polls, ways to send messages to elected officials, and opportunities to sign petitions posted there by others trying to make a difference.

*Thomas: Legislative Information on the Internet* (<http://thomas.loc.gov>) was brought online by a team at the Library of Congress in January 1995, acting under the directive of the leadership of the 104th

Congress to make Federal legislative information available to the Internet public. In addition to the databases of information available here, the home page provides links of interest and information about how laws are made and the process for the enactment of a law. Within this site, the user can find directories for both the House of Representatives and the Senate. The House site gives users access to an alphabetical list of representatives, with their room assignments and phone numbers, lists by state delegation, and a list of committee assignments. Within the area for the Senate, each senator's name is linked to his or her home page with directory information (room, phone, fax number) as well as other information provided by that senator's office. Thomas also provides links to the Web sites for other legislative agencies: the House of Representatives, the Senate, the Library of Congress, the Government Printing Office, the General Accounting Office, the Congressional Budget Office, the Architect of the Capitol, and the Office of Technology Assessment.

*Vote.com* (<http://www.vote.com>) was designed to give users a voice on important public issues and other topics. This site gives users a chance to speak out and to be heard through a series of topics open for discussion. When a user votes on a topic listed on the site, Vote.com will send an email to significant decision-makers, congressional representatives, senators, and the president, informing them of votes made on Vote.com. Users can also suggest specific topics for discussion to be posted on the site.

#### *Collective Agency and the Internet*

*Action!Network* (<http://actionnetwork.org>) is a site that links users to online activism centers for over 170 leading environment, health and population advocacy organizations. Action Network partners mobilize users through the use of e-mail, by allowing them to consider issues and by sending personalized email messages to key local, national, and world policymakers. Visitors to the site are given an opportunity to browse and join active campaigns that have been posted by other users.

*Amnesty International* (<http://www.amnesty.org>) is an independent organization that defines itself as "a worldwide movement of people who campaign for internationally recognized human rights." Its goal is to see a world where everyone can enjoy all that is outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards. Amnesty International's mission is to engage in research and to take action against abuses of the rights to physical and mental integrity, freedom of conscience and expression, and freedom from discrimination. Amnesty International works to improve human rights around the world through the actions of ordinary people, which has consistently been acknowledged through the voices of victims who have been assisted



through the actions of Amnesty International.

*ePALS Classroom Exchange* (<http://www.epals.com>) provides school-safe email and collaborative technologies that are utilized in over 191 countries and by more than 4.6 million students and educators in order to employ the Internet for communication and cross-cultural learning. ePALS began as a place where teachers, interested in utilizing technology to assist collaborative learning, could connect their students with students in other areas around the globe. Not only does this site provide tools and a meeting place for students throughout the world, it offers ideas for ways to enact change through collaboration and for areas where students may contribute their views on various matters. During its existence, the United Nations, the US Department Health and Human Services, the White House, and the Canadian Prime Minister's Office all have been groups that have worked with ePALS on collaborative projects with K-12 schools.

*Free the Children* (<http://freethechildren.org>) is an international network of children helping children at local, national, and international levels through representation, leadership, and action. The site was founded by Craig Kielburger in 1995, when he was twelve years old. The principal goal of Free the Children is not only to free children throughout the world from poverty and exploitation but to allow young people to see that they are not powerless to bring about positive social change and that they can improve the lives of their peers. The site notes Free the Children is not like other children's charity organizations, as it is an organization "by, of, and for children" that embraces the notion that young people can be leaders in the pursuit of creating a more just, equitable, and sustainable world. Free the Children has been actively involved in bringing the issue of child exploitation squarely on the agenda of the international community and in helping children to find solutions to issues of interest to them and their peers. Free the Children's accomplishments have been recognized by many organizations around the world, including the United Nations.

*Voices of Youth* (<http://www.unicef.org/voy/index.php>) began in 1995 as a way in which young people could send messages to the world leaders at the World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995 and as part of the celebration for UNICEF's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. From its inception, Voices of Youth was created in hopes of making sure that young people from throughout the world could learn more, say more, and do more about the world in which they live. Through comments from children from over one hundred countries, the Voices of Youth Web site has been broken down into three distinct areas where its visitors can explore, speak out, and take action. By joining Voices of Youth, the visitor can join in discussions with children around the world and "speak out." UNICEF insures that children's comments are heard throughout the globe by including them within Voices of Youth's bimonthly newsletter, *What Young People Are Saying*, in many UNICEF publications, including

the flagship annual report *The State of the World's Children*, and through representatives at United Nations conferences and events. The Voices of Youth site notes that "everybody—and every generation—has a chance to change the world. Your chance is now if you want it." Through its site, the Voices of Youth program shows children how together they can make a difference in the world.

The *Youth Leadership Initiative* (<http://www.youthleadership.net>) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan national civic education program that was created in order to involve children in the American electoral and policymaking process. In efforts to achieve its objectives, the Youth Leadership Initiative offers technology-based resources that promote long-term civic engagement, as well as producing technology-based projects that bring the American democratic process to the classroom. This program is dedicated to the idea that "government works better when politics work better, and that politics works better when citizens are informed and active participants." They believe this process begins with our nation's youngest citizens.

#### *Examples and Instructional Guide*

*StopFamilyViolence.org* (<http://www.democracyinaction.org/sfvo>) is the result of one woman's awareness of how the Congress' failure to reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was going to impact her community. Her determination at the grassroots level helped secure the passage of VAWA through the creation of StopFamilyViolence.org. Her site allowed visitors the opportunity to identify their legislators and contact them and the media directly about this crisis; her efforts contributed over 164,000 messages to Congress in support of VAWA. On October 28, 2000, President Clinton signed legislation, which included VAWA, into law. In twelve weeks time, Irene Weiser had helped move a stagnant issue into one that saw a 100 percent increase in funding for the Violence Against Women Act.

*Multimedia Mania* (<http://www.ncsu.edu/mmania>) is an annual award program whose purpose is to promote the collaboration of K-12 teachers and students in creating multimedia projects. This program is intended for students and teachers who utilize multimedia to teach and learn specific content. Students are given an opportunity to share dynamic multimedia projects with an international audience. The primary goal of Multimedia Mania is to find real, working models of skillful and meaningful integration of technology into a typical classroom setting. One project, entitled "Zero Waste," was a cooperative project created by students between the ages of seven and ten attending the Tahatai Coast School in Papamoa, New Zealand. This project addressed the issue of recycling and taking personal responsibility for recycling. The

project presented information about the students' philosophy on recycling, their inquiry into this problem, and how to go about solving problems surrounding recycling. The ultimate goal of this project was to eliminate waste in their school because "items such as glass, paper, cardboard and plastic take so long to decompose."<sup>48</sup> Another project, a 2000 award-winner entitled "Landmines," was developed by a team of two students in grades 7 and 8 at Centennial Public School, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. These students examined the topic of landmines, including the victims, countries affected, types and purpose of landmines, the banning of landmines initiatives, and information on how to de-mine. Not only did these students gain new insights into the issue of landmine use, but they were also invited to become involved in efforts related to banning and de-mining of landmines, and received a school visit from Rochelle Johnston of the Red Cross, a landmine activist, and Rae McGrath, the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize co-winner. The Multimedia Mania Awards Program allowed an opportunity for several students to become agents on a global stage through the Web site and a professionally produced CD, which was distributed through the International Society for Technology in Education.

The *Constitutional Rights Foundation: Implementing a Civic Action Project* (<http://www.crf-usa.org>) offers teachers a short guide that details a nine-step process for empowering their students through the planning and implementation of civic participation projects based in their own community. Teachers can download materials (The Six Basic Steps of an Action Project, Project Plan, Project Ideas, and Organizations Concerned with Violence) for use in the classroom. The Six Basic Steps of an Action Project gives students an overview of six steps they can take to complete an action project: (1) select a problem to work on; (2) research the problem; (3) choose a project; (4) plan the project; (5) do the project; and, (6) evaluate what you have done. A Project Plan is provided to help students with the process of planning an action project. It gives users a step-by-step guide for planning a project and filling out a project plan. The Project Ideas area lists ideas for projects in which children might choose to address issues of violence, terrorism, and healing. The section, entitled Organizations Concerned with Violence, provides the user with places to look for information and support around issues of violence in their community.

### Conclusion

When young people are informed of agentic opportunities and are armed with the most current information and multiple perspectives, their awareness can increase motivation to initiate civic action on behalf of those in need.<sup>49</sup> By educating youth, we can empower these children to

become change agents in the future and overcome apathetic and disparaging mentalities and replace them with desires for action. Through the power of the Internet, every individual has the ability to serve as an agentic force for change within society. The Internet provides a way for individuals to fulfill promises of democracy and to become empowered agents for social change. It has the capacity of providing users with effective tools to supply them with opportunities for exercising their freedom of speech, protecting their rights, and facilitating action. Educators need to embrace the opportunities presented by the Internet and other technologies in order to prepare their student population to become participating citizens in an increasingly global community.

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